Weinberger, Leaving the Government, Deplores Escalating Costs of Welfare

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SAN FRANCISCO, July 21—Caspar W. Weinberger will leave government Aug. 10, somewhat melancholy about where the nation's commitment to social welfare will lead, but with enough anecdotes about Ronald Reagan, Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford to dine out on for the rest of his life.

In 1968, Mr. Weinberger, now 57 years old, left a lucrative law practice, a syndicated newspaper column, an educational TV program, and a lovely home on the San Francisco peninsula to become Governor Reagan's budget maker. After two years he went to Washington to do the same thing for President Nixon.

In 1973, Mr. Nixon made him Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and Mr. Ford would have kept him there until at least 1977, but Mr. Weinberger elected to resign and return to San Francisco.

Mr. Weinberger's valedictory as a Cabinet member was a speech today at the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, where he spoke of the "all pervasive Federal Government" whose budget had grown 83 per cent since he went to Washington in 1970 — from $185.6-billion to $338.9-billion.

As a certified fiscal conservative, Mr. Weinberger spoke in a recent interview in his office in Washington of "too much reliance on government," of social programs enacted "in a fit of absentmindedness" to create a system that is "a bit by bit fragmented approach."

The New York Times
Caspar W. Weinberger

"The statistic that bothers me the most is that if we keep going the way we are, by the year 2000—just 25 years from now—we will be spending 51 per cent of the gross national product on domestic social programs and now all levels of government use only about 37 per cent."

He said he believed that social welfare programs were consuming far too much of the nation's wealth, leaving far too little for the expansion of capital investment that would increase consumer products and provide more opportunity for meaningful jobs. Few people realize the extent of the welfare bite into tax revenues, he said.

"We have moved from something like 20 per cent of the Federal budget to over half the budget on domestic social programs in a period of a little over a decade," he said.

Mr. Weinberger picked the food stamp operation to illustrate how he sees welfare programs evolving. He said it had started for about $40-million as a means of getting surplus commodities to the needy. Now, he said, it has mushroomed into something that will cost about $4-billion a year, reaching upward of 15 million people. The school milk program has become just a means of selling milk, he said.

Mr. Weinberger has proposed abandoning all the welfare programs and substituting a system that would bring direct cash payments to persons whose income is below certain standards. But he said he expected Congress to ignore this idea.

Mr. Weinberger will leave Washington with an immense stock of anecdotes from his government years.

He recalled that as director of the Office of Management and Budget, he attended the 1972 post-election Cabinet meeting where the Cabinet officers waited for President Nixon, obviously expecting to enjoy a discussion of the impact of the powerful mandate the voters had bestowed.

"He was silent," Mr. Weinberger said of Mr. Nixon's appearance that day. "He said that frequently there is a loss of momentum in the second term over the first term and he didn't want that to happen and he thought they should consider that they were not permanently in the positions they held. Indeed, they were asked to submit their resignations."

After the President left, H.R. Haldeman his chief of staff, said that "in case you didn't understand what the President meant," he wanted "all of your resignations immediately." Mr. Haldeman distributed sample resignation forms to be used by Cabinet staff, too.

"The Cabinet was sitting around with their mouths open and this great moment of triumph was passing by without proper recognition," Mr. Weinberger said.

When the Cabinet officers were summoned to Camp David for interviews about their futures a few days later, Mr. Weinberger rode up in a helicopter with Peter G. Peterson, then Secretary of Commerce. "The test here is whether you have the new or the old helicopter," Mr. Weinberger quoted Secretary Petersen as explaining that day. "The old helicopter has a chute in it and they open it as they get you over the Jefferson Memorial if you're not to be retained."

In his interview with the President, Mr. Weinberger was persuaded to stay on in Washington as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. Mr. Petersen was offered a roving ambassadorship that he found unsuitable and left government.

Discussing the Watergate cover-up, Mr. Weinberger said he had reluctantly accepted the view that Mr. Nixon had been lying in his denial. He said of the Democratic National Committee offices burglary: "I thought it was just a few people on their own. More and more it began to unwind, however."

The "Saturday Night Massacre" disturbed him, Mr. Weinberger said. He learned of it in a call from Bryce Harlow, a White House staff member, who, he remembered, said:

"We are notifying the Cabinet that the President has asked for the resignation of [illegible] Archibald Cox. So of course Elliott Richardson has resigned and of course, therefore, William Ruckelshaus has resigned, and is there anything else you want to know?"

Then one night last August there came a call from Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., White House staff director. From memory Mr. Weinberger quoted that exchange:

H: Now there is this further thing. There is this tape. The President did have knowledge of this from the beginning. After it had happened.

W: That's the absolute end. At there is no possibility of avoiding impeachment with that.

H: That's right.

W: What's being done?

H: Well, I think we're going to be able to persuade the President that that is the case and that he would serve the country better if he would step aside.

Mr. Weinberger then went to the Tuesday Cabinet meeting where Mr. Nixon said he would not quit without him on TV when he told he would resign, and then went to the White House for the Friday, Aug. 9, 1974, farewell speech that Mr. Nixon gave as he left town.

"The last time I saw him was the day he resigned and gave that perfectly awful speech," Mr. Weinberger said. "I was myself embarrassed. It was an awful thing to see. It was like watching someone who had stepped down and was flagellating himself. It was gruesome. It was maudlin. I was particularly unfortunate that no one [illegible] or his daughters had had the [illegible]